



APPL

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ASK MAGAZINE: By practitioners for practitioners.

ASK VOLUME ONE:

STORIES

Natural Relationship
by Michael C. Jansen

Experience Before Age

One of the team leads I worked with was a chief without braves. A senior engineer, he grew thoroughly disillusioned as he watched his technical area whittle down from its heyday of 10 percent of our division's civil service workforce, plus a healthy contingent of contractors, to two part-time civil servants and as many contractors. It was apparent to him (and to me) that there was no management support for his area, neither within the Program Office he supported, nor therefore from our line organization.

Since he was eligible for retirement, he was seriously contemplating hanging up his slide-rule, despite the fact that he hadn't intended to retire for several years yet. The truly sad thing was that he and I could see clearly that his technical area was indeed vital to the Program. That fact was simply going unrecognized.

With some prodding and youthful exuberance, I got him and his decimated team to flesh out a minimum-but-necessary set of tasks that should be performed by his technical area in order for the Program to be safe and succeed. We also worked out the requisite staffing and funding levels they would need. We then approached the Program Office with our well-researched plan and gained acceptance thereof. That single success suddenly gave him back a meaningful team (about 50 percent greater than during its heyday) and, more importantly, a powerful sense of his own vital purpose.

Now that the team's products were required for flight certification, suddenly my colleague the senior engineer was too busy, and far too energized, to contemplate retirement. I noted that increasingly he would drop by my office to ask advice regarding how to approach the Program Office on certain matters, on working issues with international counterparts, on personnel matters, on sizing and development of new tasks, and on such personal matters as career development (this, from a near-retiree!). I was delighted to be of assistance.

After a couple of years, his visits became less frequent as he gained confidence in his own abilities. I have since moved on to another organization and we rarely interact, but I still hear occasionally about his team and its continued growth and achievement under his able leadership.

This example illustrates that one can benefit from mentoring at any point in one's career. Contrary to the stereotype of the aged veteran taking the younger mentee under his wing, it can work the other way around too. It was natural for me to try and help this senior engineer. We worked together in the same office, and it was obvious that my helping him was good for everyone.

You Just Can't Fake It

The people I consider to have been mentors to me grew into their roles gradually and subconsciously. The mentor relationships became natural extensions of existing work relationships and, as such, never had a forced or strained feel about them. They were very successful experiences. I learned greatly, and (I perceive) my mentors derived satisfaction from watching me grow professionally. I believe the same characterization applies to the half dozen or so work colleagues to whom I (in hindsight) have acted as mentor.

In contrast, I once volunteered to be a mentor for an at-risk middle-school student as part of a work-sponsored educational outreach program. I assume that the young man I was paired with wanted to be there; participants had to volunteer and be screened and recommended by their teachers, and he seemed as enthusiastic about the program as any self-conscious pre-teen might appear to be. Despite our radically differing backgrounds and ages, we seemed to get off to a good start, and his grades slowly began to improve.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Soon my workload increased, and this voluntary sideline became more and more of an unwelcome intrusion. I persevered in mentoring the student out of obligation, and did my best not to let on that my mind was elsewhere. He knew it. Soon his fledgling enthusiasm waned, and he began to miss our scheduled meetings. After a while, when I heard his family had moved out of the district, I was more relieved than anything; I could concentrate on work and leave this unfortunate fizzled effort behind me. I have to wonder, though, how much better off he might have been had he had a more dedicated mentor.

Someone who mentors out of obligation must be an exceptional actor to create the illusion of putting the energy and personal interest into it that a natural mentor would, and mentees are quick to pick up on (and be turned off by) the artificial nature of such a relationship.

Lessons Learned

1. Relative age is unimportant; a young person can be a mentor to a senior person. The mentor needs only to be more experienced than the mentee in an area of mutual interest.
2. The mentor relationship should become natural extensions of existing work or personal relationships and, as such, never be forced or have a strained feel about it. **ASK**



Question:

What ways can organizations develop successful mentoring programs when mentoring relationships don't seem to occur naturally? Does any formal program necessarily preclude heartfelt mentoring from occurring?